

# Rise & Fall of the Canton Trade System - III

## Canton & Hong Kong

by Peter C. Perdue

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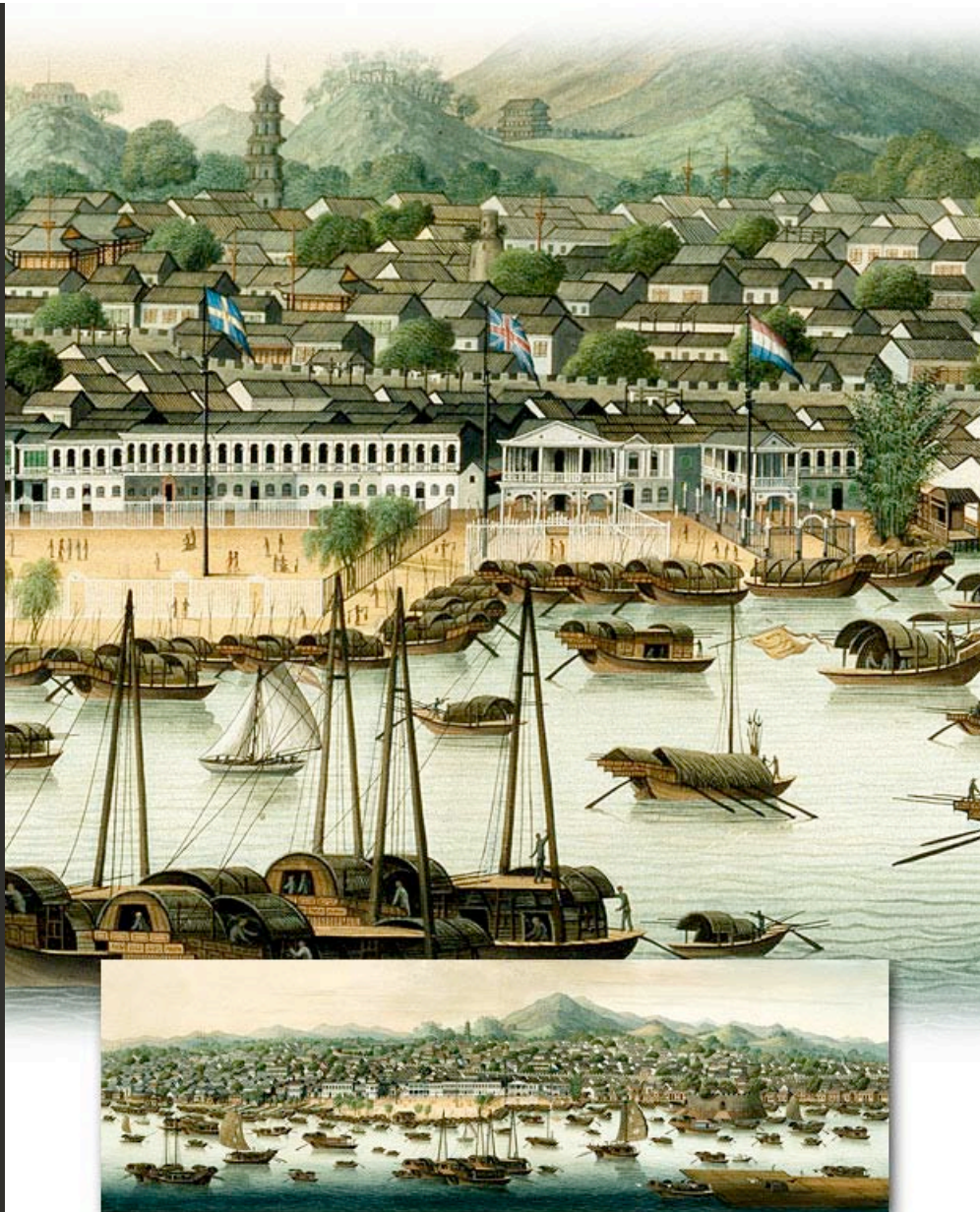
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## Canton Trade

During the passage from Macau up the Pearl River foreigners passed through densely populated agricultural lands and market towns, but they never saw a major city until they reached Guangzhou. We call the trading system that lasted from 1700 to 1842 on China's south coast the "Canton system" because of this city's dominance. Guangzhou (which Europeans called Canton), an ancient city and one of the largest in South China, had flourished as an administrative and trading center for over 1000 years before the Westerners arrived. Arab and Persian traders had lived in its foreign quarters under the Tang dynasty since the 8th century. Like most traditional Chinese cities, Canton had a large wall surrounding the central districts, major avenues within the wall, extensive market districts outside the wall, and constant contact by riverboats with the surrounding countryside and distant ports.

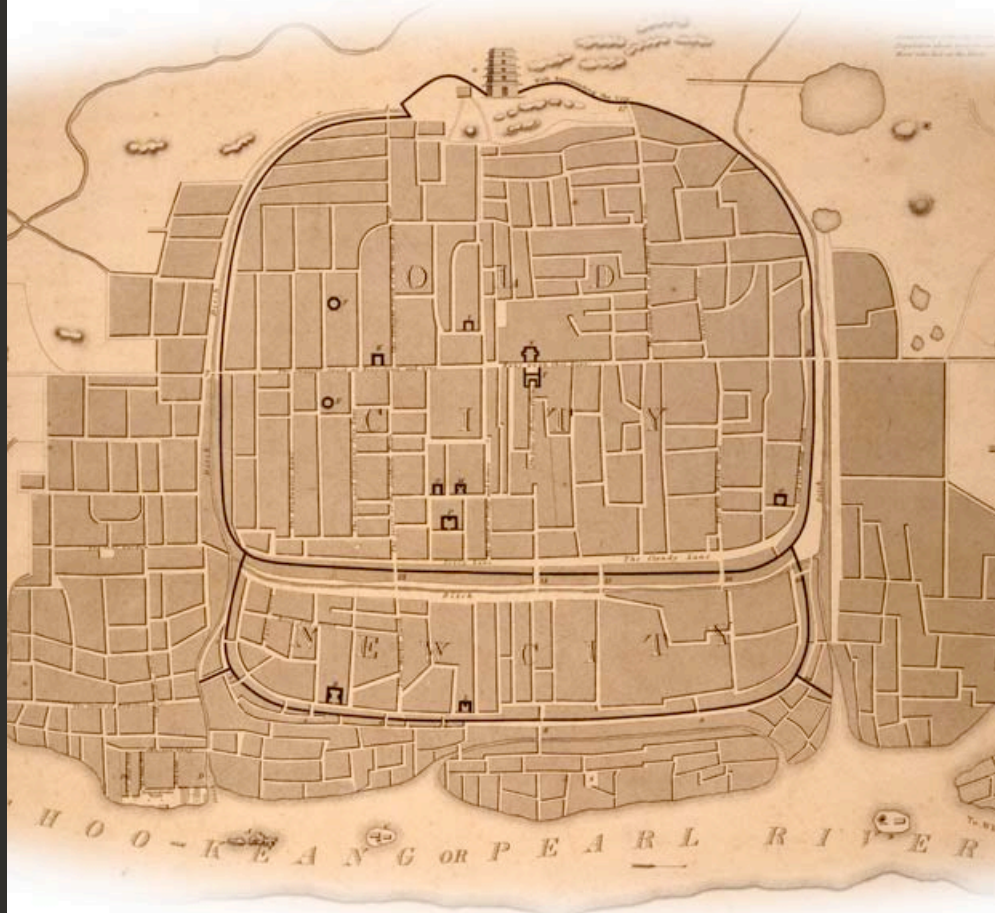


*Canton was a large, densely populated Chinese city. Most of the buildings in this ca. 1800 view are two- or three-story buildings used both as residences and shops. The pagoda and five-story watchtower rise above the city, surrounded by the mountains where country estates and guard houses were located. Prominently featured in the foreground, with foreign flags, the area to which foreigners were confined was a tiny district of several acres on the banks of the river, where thousands of boats collected for trade. Many cities along China's southern coast had created foreign quarters for much earlier generations of Indian and Middle Eastern traders. The Westerners were just the latest arrivals.*

*"Canton with the Foreign Factories," ca. 1800  
unknown Chinese artist*

Peabody Essex Museum [cwC\_1800c\_E79708]

Chinese cities were planned as segregated environments, with separate districts for different purposes. The official headquarters, usually in the north central area of the city, faced south over their subjects. Wide avenues separated residential wards from each other, and these wards often had gates. Market places were spread through the inner city, but much of the mercantile activity took place outside the city walls. In cities located on major rivers large clusters of boats, ranging from small sampans to large junks, gathered at the wharves and merchants conducted business between the river and the city wall. Canton's foreign quarter, sited between the city wall and the river, fit comfortably into the classic design of south Chinese cities.



*This British map of Canton shows the city walls, "Old" and "New City," the "Five-Storey Watchtower" at the top, and the river with both Chinese and English names "Choo-Keang or Pearl River" at the bottom. The text reads: "A Plan of the City of Canton and its Suburbs Shewing [sic] the principal Streets and some of the conspicuous Buildings from a Chinese Survey on an Enlarged Scale with additions and References, by W. Bramston, Late of Her Majesty's Superintendents Office at Canton, 1840."*

*A British Map of Canton, 1840  
by W. Bramston*

Hong Kong Museum of Art [cwC\_1840\_AH64115]

The Ming emperors confined Western traders to the town of Macau, but the Qing emperors expanded their access in the 18th century. The Qing rulers were Manchus from northeast China who conquered the core of Han China in the mid 17th century. As people from the borderlands, they were accustomed to relations with many different kinds of peoples and gave each group its place. They called many of the foreign peoples "tributaries," meaning those who came to give tribute or gifts to the emperor out of gratitude for his benevolent rule. The Westerners who arrived in China to trade in the 18th century joined these tributary peoples. From the Qing official point of view, Westerners were just one of hundreds of different peoples who admired and sought to profit from their relationship with the flourishing empire.

Since the early 17th century, the Dutch and the English had tried to gain trading privileges with China as the Portuguese had done in Macau, but the Chinese rulers prevented regular access until they had secured control of Taiwan in 1683. Then the Chinese and foreigners began to negotiate regular terms of trade at several different ports. By the early 18th century, Canton had emerged as the most convenient port for both the Chinese and foreigners. The Manchu court favored foreign trade as long as it was conducted in a stable and predictable fashion under government regulation. They appointed the superintendent of customs, or *hoppo*, as the official responsible for collecting customs duties and managing orderly trade in Canton. Since the Cantonese already had over a century of experience dealing with the Portuguese in Macau, they could take care of the new arrivals without much difficulty.

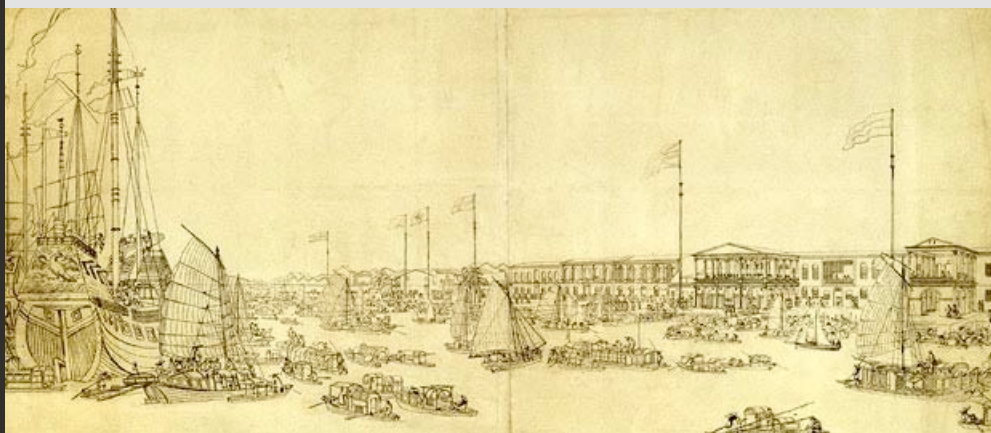
The Qing government tightened control in 1741 by requiring all foreigners to leave Canton and return to Macau when the trading season ended, and officially restricted all trade to Canton after 1757. The foreigners constantly complained about these restrictions, but the fact that trade grew steadily through the 18th century shows that they could do very profitable business despite the regulations.

While in Canton, the foreign merchants formed a separate community. On the Chinese side, a special guild of merchants, the *Co-hong*, obtained a monopoly over trade with the foreigners. After paying the *hoppo* substantial sums for the privilege of trading with foreigners, these *hong* merchants profited greatly from their access to foreign trade. Although the Qing emperors kept their distance from the foreign traders, they gained a great deal of personal revenue from them. The duties from trade went directly to the imperial household.

Like their predecessors, the Qing emperors required foreigners to live in a separate quarter of the city. The foreigners lived in buildings called "factories," which included living quarters, warehouses, and offices for trade. (These factories did not manufacture anything; the name comes from "factor," an older English word for "commercial agent.") The Chinese called them "hongs," or merchant shops. The factory buildings lined up along the waterfront, each with its distinctive national flag. The British were the first to arrive, but soon after the Austrians, Danish, Dutch, French, Spanish, Swedish, and Americans followed them. The entire quarter acquired the name "Thirteen Factories." The foreign quarter burned down in fires in 1822, 1841, and 1856, after which it was moved to Shamian Island farther up the river. Both Chinese and Western artists frequently painted the distinctive facades of the factories lining the river, and the throngs of Chinese (and, later, foreign) ships of all sizes and shapes. Charles Toogood Downing wrote that "the city of boats in the Canton river at all times appears highly novel and attractive to the visitor." He especially enjoyed the early nighttime, "when every boat, barge, and sampan is lighted up, and the bustle and clamour on board of them are at their height."

## *Variations on a Scene*

*Early Views of Canton's Harbor and Foreign Quarter  
by Thomas and William Daniell*



*The foreign factories that line the Canton waterfront are easily recognized by their nations' flags. Thomas Daniell and his nephew and apprentice William arrived in Canton in late August 1785. The artists spent several months sketching in China en route to India. Upon returning to England in 1793, they turned some of their drawings into prints and paintings. The top drawing is an early view most likely created in 1785, notably missing the American flag as the Americans did not have a hong location until 1788. The oil paintings were based on the drawing, though the boats have been substantially altered.*

*"A View of the European Factories at Canton," ca. 1785  
by William and Thomas Daniell*

top: ca. 1785 Peabody Essex Museum [cwC\_1785c\_M10474]  
middle: 1805-10 National Maritime Museum [nmm\_1805-10\_ZBA1291]  
bottom: 1805-06 Hong Kong Museum of Art [cwC\_1805c\_AH6424]

The foreigners in Canton were immersed in a dense, old Chinese city, of which they formed a small part. Despite the restrictions, they were still part of Chinese commercial life. From their factories, they could peer into a vast, wealthy continent whose riches made all the difficulties worthwhile. They faced risks of fire, disease, and social unrest along with their Chinese counterparts. They pressed for greater access to the interior of China, but for nearly 150 years could not move out of their profitable ghetto.

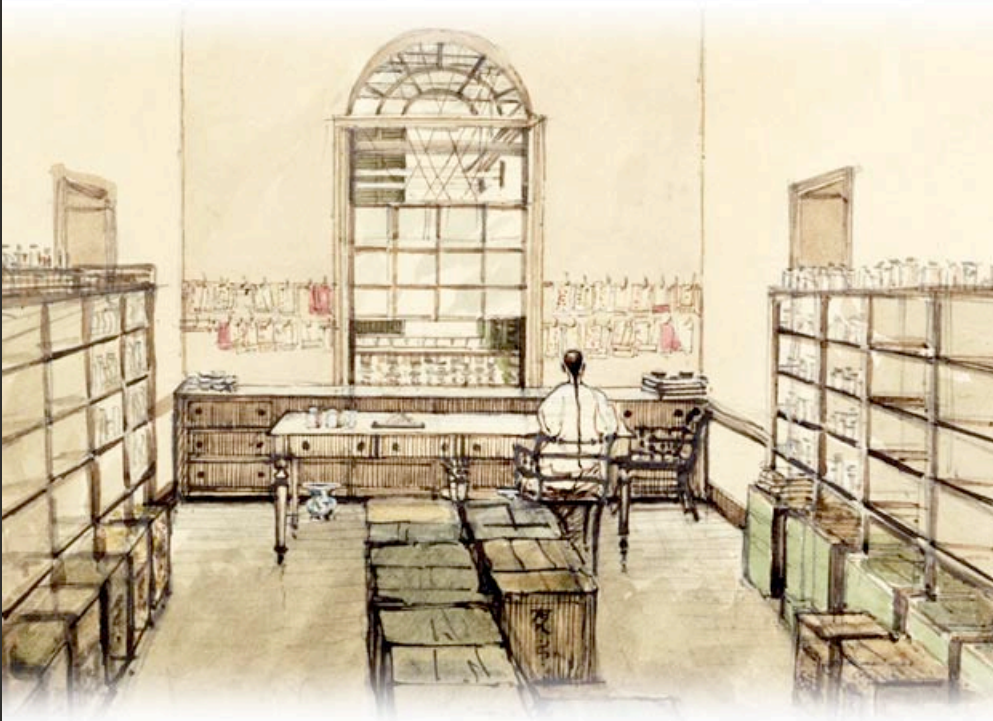


*A finely drawn view of the “Hongs”—as the Chinese called the Western factories in Canton—appears on this 1785 punch bowl (shown with enlarged detail). The first European warehouses in Canton were built in 1748. The gates open to the waterfront where many small Chinese boats supported the foreign trade. The circumference of the bowl shows the flags of some of the trading nations, including Holland, France, Imperial Austria, Sweden, Great Britain, and Denmark.*

*Porcelain punch bowl, China, ca. 1785*

Peabody Essex Museum [cwO\_1785c\_E75076]

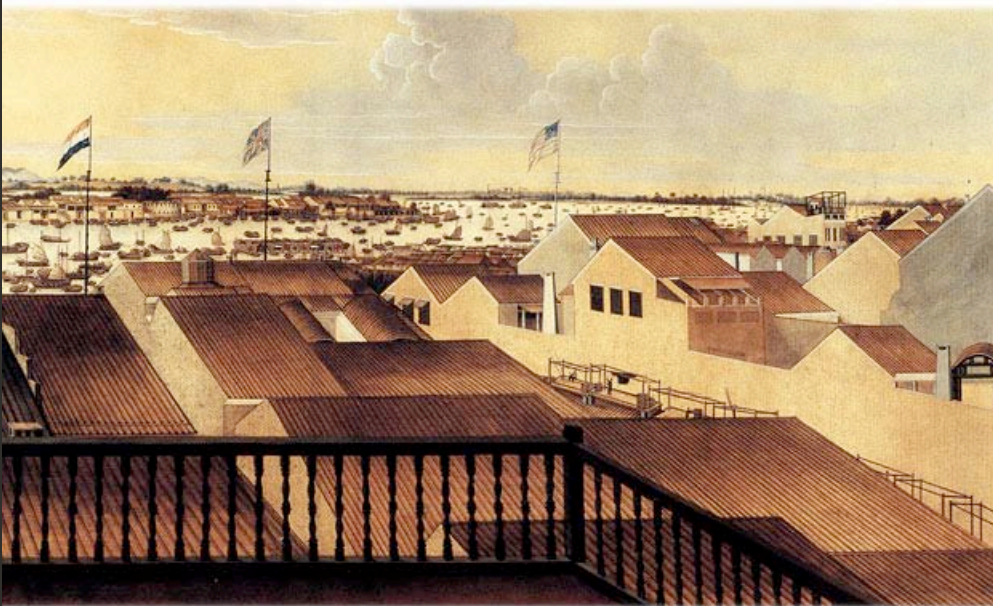
Although their impressive facades copied Western classical designs, behind the facades the factories looked very much like typical Cantonese merchant buildings. They had a long, narrow hallway down the middle, with rooms off to the sides. Chinese contractors provided nearly all of the construction materials, including low-fired brick, tile roofs, paving stones, lime, iron, marble, and bamboo. The British supplied teakwood windows and stairs, iron door locks and stoves, and glass window panes. Small courtyards were scattered through the building complex. The bedrooms upstairs, and the clerks' rooms, were simple and spare.



*This rare view of the interior of a hong shows one of its most important offices—the tea tasting room. Since tea was China’s most valuable export, Chinese specialists worked for the foreign merchants to ensure that the leaves were of the highest quality.*

*“A Tea Tasters Office, Whitmans Hong,” 1888  
by Warner Varnham*

Peabody Essex Museum [cwT\_1888\_M20597]



*This unusual view looks out over the rooftops at the harbor. On the right Hog Lane—a busy shopping street and favorite haunt for sailors to procure rice liquor—is only hinted at through the tops of the vendors’ stalls, with two people doing laundry.*

*“Panoramic View of Canton Across the Rooftops of the  
Foreign Factories,” ca. 1810  
unknown artist, possibly Tonequa*

Hong Kong Museum of Art [cwc\_1810c\_AH892\_Roof\_sc]

Chinese ships ranged from small low sampans, on which Chinese families lived, to large ships carrying Chinese officials flying imperial flags. The most impressive Chinese ship belonged to the hoppo, the official superintendent of maritime customs. He collected the duties on the foreign trade and sent them directly to the imperial household, so he was under close supervision. He and his employees struggled constantly against smuggling and trade in illegal commodities. When he arrived in the port for inspections, boats flocked to his large junk. Since the Westerners themselves could not bring large ships up the river to Canton, Chinese ships dominated the river.



*The hoppo was the official superintendent of maritime customs for Guangdong province. He commanded one of the largest ships in the harbor, and was responsible for the smooth conduct of trade and suppression of smuggling. When he arrived for inspection visits, the merchants and local officials turned out to receive him. The hoppo reported directly to the emperor, but foreign merchants could only approach him through the hong merchants.*

*“View of Hoppo Returning,” late 18th century  
unknown Chinese artist*

Hong Kong Museum of Art [cwC\_1760-99c\_AH64196\_Hoppo]

### **The Foreign Demand for Arts and Crafts**

Fascinated by their new settlements, the traders commissioned Chinese artists to paint the foreign quarter. Oil painting was a new skill for Chinese artists but they quickly learned the craft, producing paintings for resident foreigners and the export trade.



## Painting for the Export Trade



Chinese artists and artisans responded eagerly to the European demand for souvenirs of their time in the Pearl River area by adapting Western styles to Chinese models of portraits and landscapes. This image of an artist's studio in Canton shows employees making multiple copies of paintings in various media. Only a few of the artists who worked on these aesthetic assembly lines can be identified, but Tinqa (an artist, not the hong merchant of the same name) ran one of the largest studios of export art in the mid 19th century.

*Studio of Guan Lianchang, also known as Tinqa (active 1830s-1870s), Guangzhou (Canton)*

Peabody Essex Museum  
[cwSHOP\_E8353243]

*This artist copies a European portrait, painting a reversed image on the back of a sheet of glass. The famous painter Spoilum, after learning this technique, set up his studio in the 1770s.*

*"A Glass Painter," ca. 1790  
Guangzhou, China  
Victoria & Albert Museum  
cwPT\_1790c\_2006AH3875\_VA]*



Spoilum (often given the Chinese name Guan Zuolin), the most talented of these Cantonese artists, learned the European technique of reverse glass painting and began producing paintings in the 1770s. He copied mirror images of European engravings onto the back of glass panes, and specialized in portraits of Europeans posed in front of Western landscapes. Spoilum had remarkable talent and versatility. His renderings of Western merchants, usually completed in sittings of two to three hours, cost around \$10 per portrait. He also produced some of the most famous paintings of Chinese hong merchants like Eshing and Puan Kee Qua. He was a truly international artist. His paintings could end up in English country homes, in the homes of sea captains in Salem, Massachusetts, or in the estates of hong merchants in Canton. His followers, including his grandson Lam Qua, continued to produce large numbers of portraits, landscapes, and miniatures through the mid 19th century.



*The silk merchant Eshing (left), and Captain Richard Wheatland of Salem (right)*

*Portraits of merchants by Spoilum, 1800–1805*

Peabody Essex Museum  
[cwPT\_1800-05\_M364\_Eshing\_sc] [cwPT\_1800-05\_M22879\_Wht\_sc]

Although the foreigners could not visit the rest of the city, they could rely on their Chinese collaborators to give them views of the entire city. Most of the paintings focused on the factories themselves, but they also included views of the landscape around Canton, the harbor, and the boats that served the foreign community. Foreign interest was so great that the Chinese artists introduced scenes of Canton into the traditional Chinese artistic media of fans, bowls, and lacquer ware. They painted scenes of Canton on the export porcelain bowls, on figurines, lacquered tables, silver mugs, and ivory carvings. Ordinary sailors as well as captains eagerly bought up the artists' production. They also took orders from their wives at home for special products to be purchased in Canton. In *The Fan-qui in China, in 1836-7*, Charles Toogood Downing commented, "Our Jack-tars are much caught by this showy material, and generally carry away some trumpery specimens to dazzle the eyes of the fair dames of Shadwell and Blackwall." Benjamin Shreve, a young American captain, not only engaged in the bulk trade in tea and silk, but spent much of his time shopping in Canton for tortoise shell combs, china plates, lacquer trays, and silk patterns for the wives of the investors in his voyage.



*This ca. 1805 reverse glass painting shows only the factories and the river, with no city behind it.*

*“Foreign Factory Site at Canton,” ca. 1805  
reverse glass painting—oil on glass, unknown Chinese artist*

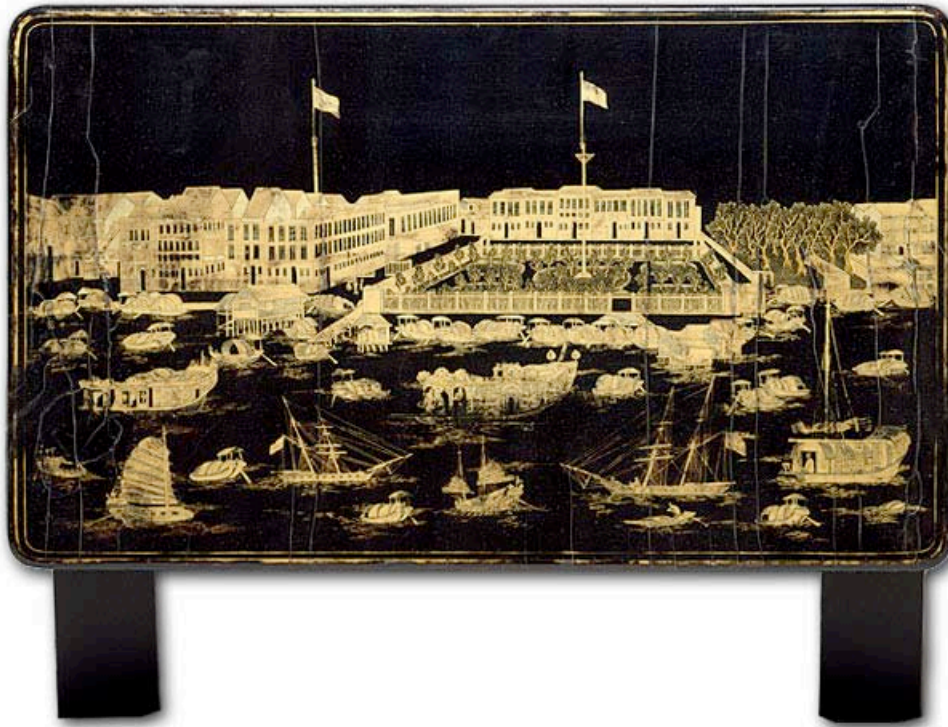
Peabody Essex Museum [cwC\_1805\_E78680]



*Chinese and Westerners populate this “hong bowl” depicting the foreign factories of Canton—a popular porcelain export object between 1760 and 1800.*

*Porcelain Punch Bowl, China, ca. 1788*

Peabody Essex Museum [cwO\_1788c\_E81407]



*This is one of a set of four lacquer nesting tables depicting Canton, Macau, Bocca Tigris, and Whampoa, ca. 1830 to 1845. The American garden with its large fence is in the center. Like porcelain, the production of high quality lacquer was a technology first developed in China, Japan, and Korea, and exported to the rest of the world. Europeans tried to copy it, but could not match the elegant aesthetic qualities of Asian designs. Traditional Chinese landscapes were common subjects of lacquerware, but scenes of the foreign residences attracted many buyers.*

*Lacquer nesting table with image of Canton, China, 1830–1840*

Peabody Essex Museum [cwO\_1830-40\_E807581]

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